

Pacifica Cliff Crisis

“Waves gnashed out a section of the sea wall last week and are threatening to eat parts of the street it protects. Since December, storm surf has damaged the end of the concrete pier and carved away sandy cliffs. Officials condemned one apartment building — next to two others that had been evacuated in 2010 — and at least two homes. El Niño is an abstruse phenomenon far easier to predict on a global scale than a local one. But just south of San Francisco, Pacifica has come to know it intimately — with both awe and dread. These bluffs have been hammered by the ocean for millennia. What makes Pacifica — a string of seaside hamlets along six miles of coast — so vulnerable is that the land is loose.”

“Tectonic stresses in this northern spur of the Santa Cruz Mountains have fractured and ground down granite, shale and sandstone into rock fragments that don't compact as well as soil. And some of the coastal bluffs are composed of little more than sand. The Italians who settled here a century ago liked the sandy soil to grow artichokes. But the loose sediment has bedeviled nearly everyone else. At the infamous Devil's Slide on the south end of town, a harrowing stretch of Pacific Coast Highway collapsed into the sea in 1940, just three years after it was built, and did so again seven more times before the state finally replaced it with twin-bore tunnels in 2013. In wet winters, rain sets off debris flows and floods the valleys, as waves tear away at the coast.”

“The two biggest El Niños on record hit hard. On Jan. 4, 1982, more than 5 inches of rain fell in one day. Residents in canoes paddled out of flooded homes in the San Pedro Valley. A mudslide at the top of the valley plowed into three homes, killing three children sleeping in their beds. The 1997-98 El Niño saw seven homes on Esplanade Avenue lose the last 10

feet of their backyards, and the residents had to evacuate. Storms in the 2009-10 winter, a moderate El Niño, forced officials to red-tag two apartment buildings on Esplanade at the edge of a 70-foot cliff.”

“According to the California Coastal Commission manager for the district, Nancy Cave, the owners of the buildings obtained emergency permits in 2003 to drop boulders at the base of the cliff to keep the waves from eating it away. They were required to come back with plans for a permanent fix but never did. Geological maps indicate that the apartments, built in 1962, are sitting on ‘dune soil.’ A photo of them taken in 1972 shows the bluff extending much farther out, sloping down, with only a band of vertical sandstone in the middle. Over the next 40 years, the water ate at the base until parts of the cliff were plumb-line-straight, from back patio to the high-tide line.” (Joe Mozingo, L.A. Times front page, February 1)

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